

Rhode Island Chapter

INCORPORATED IN RHODE ISLAND

American Academy of Pediatrics

DEDICATED TO THE HEALTH OF ALL CHILDREN



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Testimony in Support of H-5789 House Finance Committee

May 2, 2021

Dear Chairperson and Members of the Committee,

The Rhode Island Chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics would like to offer full support for Rhode Island House Bill 5789 which expands access to paid leave and outlines a comprehensive strategy to meet the critical need for a well-funded and well-managed paid family leave program to help all Rhode Island families navigate caregiving responsibilities with work responsibilities.

As pediatricians in Rhode Island, we frequently see the importance of paid family leave. In Rhode Island, this program is called the Temporary Caregiver Insurance Program (TCI). Many families in our practices use this program to care for newborn infants, adopted children, and children newly diagnosed with life altering conditions. The current program provides up to 4 weeks of partial wage replacement to workers who take time off from work to bond with a newborn, care for a foster or adopted child, or care for a seriously ill family member. Research shows that allowing parents to take adequate time off to bond with a child is important to early brain development and overall health outcomes for children. It improves maternal health as well, as it increases rates of breastfeeding, decreases rates of maternal depression, and allows women to heal and recover from a vaginal or Caesarian Section Delivery. The rate of wage replacement in Rhode Island is currently up to 60% of their wages. This is the lowest of any paid leave program in the United States. It limits access to the program for workers with low incomes who are less likely to use this benefit despite having paid into the TCI fund. To remain on par with our neighbors in Massachusetts and Connecticut and to meet the needs of workers and families, Rhode Island should increase the benefit rate up to 90%.

I would like to share a story from my own pediatric practice in Rhode Island, where I provide primary care and a medical home for children with complex medical needs. I care for a child with a rare genetic condition that impacts his metabolism. This baby presented the Emergency Room the evening he left the birthing hospital after a healthy pregnancy and uneventful delivery. This is a typical presentation for this condition. He was readmitted to the hospital for several weeks for evaluation, diagnostic work up, and to initiate treatment. At the time of discharge, he had seizures, poor feeding, and irritability. Unfortunately, his mother had already used her maternity leave. Skilled home nursing was authorized, but not yet available, so the family had to enroll him in a daycare. The mother was frequently called out of work to pick him up for illness, or to go to the ER if he was taken there for seizures. She would miss opportunity to earn her regular wage when she had to leave and care for him during these periods of time. It was incredibly stressful – not only did the family have to cope with the needs of their medically fragile son, but they were presented with new financial stressors while managing lost wages and paying for daycare. An adequately funded TCI program would have provided financial stability to the family and allowed his mother to stay home to care for him and bond while waiting for skilled home nursing assistance.

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During the last year, the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the need for workers to have access to paid leave. Rhode Island workers were more likely to use the benefit in 2020 than in 2019, with 1600 more workers making claims last year. Of those claiming TCI benefits, only 60% were caring for a newborn; the other 40% used TCI to care for other family members including grandchildren, siblings, and other loved ones. The Rhode Island Chapter of the AAP supports the legislation introduced by Representative Cassar. It calls for several comprehensive improvements to the current TCI program so that all Rhode Islanders – regardless of income – have access to this support. It allows for self-employed individuals and gig workers to pay into the system and access benefits. It increases the benefit rate up to 90% so that low-income workers can take leave and still afford to meet their basic needs, and it also allows for a tax credit for these same low-wage income workers who contribute to the program and do not access the benefit. We are also pleased that the legislation increases the duration of benefit from 4 weeks to 12, insuring adequate time for caregivers to manage the needs of their newborn, child, or loved one.

Rhode Island pediatricians work daily to improve the health and well-being for children and their families. All families should have an opportunity for caregivers to feel supported while caring for their loved ones. Expanding access to paid leave is necessary, so that caregivers do not have to choose between their job and their loved ones. Caregivers need increased support to allow for greater work-life balance. Parenting and caregiving needs are often unique to each family unit. Added access and flexibility improves outcomes for children, families, and the community.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Allison W. Brindle, MD

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